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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Committee on Appropriations
Washington, DC 20515-6015

May 14, 2004

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The Honorable Ann Veneman
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Madam Secretary,

We are extremely concerned that the Forest Service wildfire management program is not adequately prepared for the current fire season. We understand that a reprogramming request has stalled, and such a reprogramming is essential to hiring over 3000 temporary fire fighters. If these workers are not hired immediately, it is likely that your capability for initial attack on wildfires will be severely hindered. Based on your own data, if even just a few fires escape initial attack and become large, there is an exponential increase in fire fighting suppression costs. More importantly, damage to individuals, communities, and resources increase dramatically. We understand that, even before the recent cancellation of the large airtanker contract, an additional \$54 million was needed just to keep the same workforce in place as existed last year.

We agree that borrowing from suppression is not a long-term solution to the fire-fighting funding problem. We also note that Congressional action increased Forest Service appropriations for wildfire suppression base funding from \$351,964,000 available in FY 2003 to \$597,130,000 in FY 2004. At the same time, the wildfire preparedness activity had a funding decrease. While it may be necessary to borrow funds in the future to supplement suppression costs, we do not want to see transfers from other Forest Service accounts as the first step to fund wildfire preparedness. We'd rather not repeat the substantial harm done to agency fiscal responsibility, resource management, and partnerships from past fire borrowing; this is documented in a new GAO report. If this fire season proves to require additional fire suppression funding, the Congress and the Administration will work together to provide adequate resources, and to achieve for cost containment.

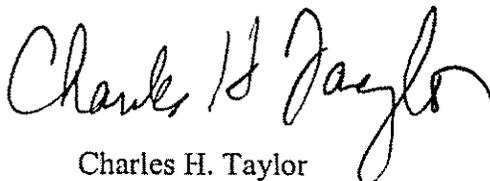
The Honorable Ann Veneman
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All indications suggest that this will be an extremely challenging fire season and we cannot afford to allow our Federal firefighter capability to fall so far below last year's level. Given the late date, and the need to have resources in place for initial attack, the Committee directs you to reprogram \$54,000,000 from the wildland fire management suppression activity to the preparedness activity, and to begin putting these fire fighters in place immediately.

Sincerely,



Norm Dicks
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Interior
and Related Agencies



Charles H. Taylor
Chairman
Subcommittee on Interior
and Related Agencies

CC Joshua Bolten, Director, OMB
Dale Bosworth, Chief, Forest Service